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## Christianity and Islam

Despite recent improvements in global communications, there is still widespread ignorance and misinterpretation of different faiths, (vide recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal*) and this leads to religion being a divisive rather than a cohesive force. There is, therefore, an ever-increasing need to promote a better understanding of all major faiths, so that inter-religious harmony may prevail. Given our multi-religious world, we must – rather than denigrate others' faiths – cultivate the transcendent genius of spirituality, so that conflicting religious loyalties do not cause a disintegration of the socio-political framework of any nation or wrongly channelize national energies.

The basic truth about different religions needs to be emphasized, so that superficial interpretations of each other's scriptures may not be used, wittingly or unwittingly, to aggravate communal tensions. Scriptures should be read not to fault them, but to grasp their underlying spirituality. Religious traditions must be understood in depth. They must be lived in order to be known.

Moreover, we must avoid judging any Holy Book by the conduct of its adherents. Rather than judge the Quran or the Bible by what Muslims or Christians do, we should go by what their scriptures prescribe. The same should strictly apply to all other faiths. Above all, we need to respond to each other's scriptures and communities with considerable tolerance.

The initial mutual goodwill and understanding which existed between Islam and Christianity has, most unfortunately, been eroded over the centuries. Perhaps a perusal of the accounts given below of early encounters between adherents of the two faiths will encourage a return to that enviable state.

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, (570- 632A.D) was twelve years old when he accompanied his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, on a caravan journey to Syria. When they camped at Busra, he met a Christian monk known as Bahira, who was well-versed in Christian scriptures. One day, as the latter emerged from his cell, he saw Muhammad, in whom he recognized the signs of Prophethood, as recounted in Christian books. After some conversation with him, he advised Abu Talib to hasten back to his land with his nephew and to protect him against enemies, for a great future lay in store for him. Somewhat alarmed, Abu Talib took him back to Makkah soon after he had finished his trading in Syria. Much later, at the age of forty, when the Prophet was meditating in a cave called Hira, situated near Makkah, he was visited by the Angel Gabriel, who came to him with the first revelations contained in the Quran in chapter 96: "Read in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of congealed blood. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful one, who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know."

After this extraordinary experience, he rushed back home to his wife Khadijah, to whom he said, trembling, "Cover me with a cloak, cover me with a cloak." Then, having recovered a little, he told her



of his experience and said: "I feel my life is in danger." She responded, "No, never! God will never bring you to grief." Then she took him to her cousin, Waraqa ibn Naufal, who had become a Christian. Waraqa's comments were: "The One who came to you is the same Namus (the specially appointed Divine Messenger) who came to Moses. I wish I were a young man and could live till the time when your people will expel you." The Prophet asked, "Will my people expel me?" Waraqa replied: "Yes, no one has been before, who brought the same thing that you have brought, without the people turning hostile to him."

The third encounter took place a few years after Muhammad's attainment of prophethood. During this period Makkah was dominated by idolaters who, rejecting monotheism, set about persecuting the Prophet and his Companions. The Prophet therefore advised his followers to leave for Abyssinia (now known as Ethiopia), a justly ruled Christian kingdom, "until God leads us to a way out of our difficulty." About eighty Muslims then emigrated to Abyssinia, where they lived under the protection of the Negus, until after the Prophet's emigration to Medina.

The Makkans, upset at this Muslim exodus, immediately sent a delegation to the Negus to ask for the emigrants' extradition to Makkah. But the Negus refused to yield to their appeal until he had heard the refugees plead their own case. This was ably done by Jafar ibn Abi Talib, who briefly described the teachings of Islam. At the request of the Negus, he recited certain divine revelations. When the patriarchs heard the first part of the chapter entitled 'Mary', confirming the Message of the Evangel, they were pleasantly surprised and said: "These words must have sprung from the same fountainhead from which the words of our Lord Jesus Christ have sprung." The Negus then said, "What you have just recited and that which was revealed to Moses must have both issued from the same source. Go forth into my kingdom; I shall not extradite you at all."

In the classical literature of Islam, there are many appreciative references to Christ and Christianity. The Quran calls Christ the 'Spirit of God' (4:171) and of Mary says: 'We breathed into her of Our spirit, and made her and her son a Sign to all men.' (21:91)

Of Christ and his followers the Quran says: 'We gave Christ the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers.' (57:27)

In another chapter the Quran states: 'The nearest in affection to the Muslims are those who say: "We are Christians." That is because there are priests and monks among them; and because they are free from pride.' (5:82-83).

In conclusion, here is a *hadith* of Sahih Muslim or saying of the Prophet Muhammad which demonstrates the Muslims' positive evaluation of Christians.

Mustaurid, a companion of the Prophet, reported that the Prophet said: "*The Day of Judgement will not come until the Christians outnumber all other people.*" Amr ibn al A' as, a senior companion of the Prophet, endorsed this:



“You are indeed right. The Christians have four characteristics. They are the most forbearing in times of adversity; they do not allow their spirits to be broken, but promptly recover from every setback; they are the first to charge again after retreat; and they are the best of all in caring for the deprived, downtrodden and the weak. Amr then added that there is a fifth feature, which is the best of all. It is that they restrain their kings from perpetrating injustice and oppression.”



### The best charity is that which is given to the weakest person

Suraqah ibn Malik says that the Prophet once asked him: "Shall I tell you what the greatest charity is?" "Please do," Suraqah replied. Then the Prophet said: "it is to spend upon a daughter who – after being widowed or divorced – is returned to you, and has no other source of support but yourself."



## Jesus in the Quran

A major portion of the Quran is dedicated to the exemplary lives of the ancient prophets. Jesus – one such prophet – is frequently mentioned in the Quran as “The Messiah,” “A Mercy;” “Prophet,” “Messenger,” “Word from God,” “Spirit,” “A Sign,” “One brought near (to God),” “Upright,” “Servant,” “Eminent,” “Blessed,” “A Witness,” and “A Parable.”

As such, he is honoured everywhere by Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad during his Night Journey to heaven, saw Jesus and described him as “a man of medium height, red complexion, curly hair and broad chest.” He moreover prophesied that Jesus would return to earth before the day of Judgement.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, described as “one exalted above all womankind,” has a whole chapter of the Quran (number 19) named after her, which tells of the miraculous birth of Jesus. The story begins with an angel announcing the birth of a holy son to Mary, who, being a chaste woman, was quite distraught at this news. But the angel reassured her that this was the will of God, that it was not a difficult thing for Him and that it was a sign and a blessing to all mankind.

When Mary gave birth to Jesus and brought him to her people, they all pointed their fingers at her. But she was told by God to remain silent and to point to the baby. As the people were wondering how they could talk to a child in the cradle, the baby Jesus performed his first miracle by saying these fine words: “I am the servant of God. He has given me the Book and ordained me a Prophet. His blessing is upon me wherever I go, and He has commanded me to be steadfast in prayers and give alms to the poor as long as I live, He has exhorted me to honour my mother and has rid me of vanity and wickedness. I was blessed on the day I was born, and blessed I shall be on the day of my death, and may peace be on me on the day when I am raised to life.”

When Jesus attained manhood, God bestowed upon him “scriptures and wisdom, along with the Torah and the Gospel.” He was also given the power to perform a number of miracles, such as creating a bird out of clay; giving sight to the blind; healing a leper and raising the dead to life; he also had the wisdom to inform people what they eat and store up in their houses.

The Quran also mentions the day when his disciples demanded that he bring down from the sky a table spread with good things. Jesus prayed for this, but warned them of God’s wrath, if they disbelieved in Him afterwards, His prayer was then answered and his disciples happily had their feast.

Yet, despite these clear signs, the Israelites rejected him, accusing him of sorcery. They made clear their outright disbelief in him when he said to them, “I am sent forth from God to confirm the Torah already revealed, and to give news of a prophet that will come after me, whose name is Ahmad.” (Ahmad is another name of the Prophet Muhammad, meaning “The Praised one”). They even tried to kill Jesus, but



God saved him at the last minute by raising him up to the sky: "They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did."

The Quran further clarifies that his creation was no different from that of the first human being: "Jesus is like Adam in the sight of God. He created him of dust and then said to him: 'Be' and he was."

Jesus taught no false worship, but only preached the unity of his Creator. On the Day of Judgement, God will question him; "Jesus, son of Mary, did you ever say to mankind: 'Worship me and my mother as gods besides God?'" Jesus will disclaim this, saying: "Glory be to You, how could I ever say that to which I have no right?" And he will add: "I only told them: 'Serve God, my Lord and your Lord.'"

The Quran also mentions the People of the Book, especially the Christians with great fondness: "The nearest of them in affection to the Muslims are those who say, 'We are Christians. That is because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are free from pride.'"

The Quran goes on to say: "There are among the People of the Book some who are upright, who recite God's message throughout the night, and prostrate themselves (before Him). They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and vie with one another in doing good works. God knows the righteous."

The Quran welcomes them to a common faith, saying: "People of the Book! Come to common terms which we and you hold in common: that we will worship only God, that we will associate none with Him, and that none of us shall take human beings as gods besides Him."



### Retribution here and now

Uthman ibn Affan, the third caliph, said one day to his slave, "Once I twisted your ear. Now take your revenge." The slave caught hold of Uthman's ear and the latter told him to twist it as hard as he could. "How good that retribution should be meted out in this world and not left to the next world," said the Caliph.



## Reciprocity

When a certain tyre company of the western world was on the point of launching its goods in the market, it ran an advertising campaign which promised that “whoever demonstrated a real defect in the tyres would win a prize of \$,50,000.” People naturally flocked to buy them. If they found a defect, well and good. If not, they had nothing to lose, because they would actually have purchased a good set of tyres.

The company did then actually receive a number of complaints of which 20 percent appeared to be genuine. The complainants were duly sent invitations to a seminar, their traveling expenses to be paid for by the company. This gave them the opportunity to air their respective views as to how the tyres could be improved. A concrete proposal was finally arrived at by consensus and rewards were distributed at the closure of the seminar.

By taking into consideration the suggestions of its customers, the Company was able to improve upon the quality of the original tyre. Although the cost had to be increased considerably, the tyres’ sale far outnumbered previous sales. Formerly the tyres had been manufactured according to the company’s own formula, while the improved version was based on the opinions and suggestions of the consumers as well. It was only natural that people should regard the product as being far superior to the original one.

In this world all people – not just manufacturers and consumers – are dependent upon one another. It is, therefore, only sharing and co-operation which can lead to success in this life. It is the principle of give-and-take which should be most active, like two-way traffic. A system of benefits can never be a one-way thing. Reciprocity should be the order of the day.



## Islam in History

According to a tradition, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, observed that every verse of the Qur'an has two levels of meaning, one apparent and one hidden. That is, we have to read between the lines in order to go beyond the literal meaning and then, by keener concentration, arrive at its deeper significance.

So far as the literal import of the Qur'an is concerned, this was fully understood by the people at the time of revelation itself. For instance, the verse, 'Say, God is one,' (Qur'an, 112:1) was correctly construed by the Muslims of the early period of Islam, just as it will be today. There will be no difference in meaning with the passage of time. But, on more profound reflection, Qur'anic nuances, hidden in the lines, become unveiled. Such close study is engaged in in every period of time, so that new shades of meaning will continue to be revealed in every age.

According to a *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, observed: "The wonders of the Qur'an will never come to an end." (*Mishkat al-Masabig*, Vol. 1, p. 659). This *hadith* refers to that aspect of the Qur'an which is of deeper significance or that which lies between the lines. The Qur'an being the scriptures of an eternal religion, new connotations will go on being revealed in every succeeding age as a result of profound reflection. This process will continue uninterrupted until Doomsday.

Here I should like to focus on certain very apt verses appearing at two places in the Qur'an. (2:193, 8:39). They concern *qital-e-fitna*, that is, the abolition of religious persecution. When we study these verses in the light of other related verses of the Qur'an, we find that it was God's plan to abolish religious persecution and replace it with complete religious freedom, so that His servants could worship Him alone without any fear of persecution. Along with that, the door to the call of monotheism also was to be thrown wide open.

### The Eradication of *Fitna*

Islam emerged in the first quarter of the seventh century. At that time, monarchy was the order of the day all over the world. To the political rulers of that epoch, dissent of any kind, particularly religious free thinking, was anathema, because they saw it as a threat to their power. Therefore, to achieve political consolidation, the monarchs of those days adopted the principle of ideological coercion. Religious persecution thus became a weapon in the hands of the despots, so that no new ideology could be allowed to develop. Strong exception was taken to the growth of any other religion save that approved by the state. The independent thinking so essential for intellectual progress, was thus cruelly suppressed, and that was why, during the long periods of monarchical rule, neither could the sciences flourish, nor



could individuals opt for the religion of their choice. Anyone who had the audacity to make an issue of this was likely to face summary execution.

The Qur'an refers thus to the religious oppression of ancient times:

Cursed be the people of the trench, who lighted the consuming fire and who sat around it watching the believers whom they were torturing. And they had nothing against them, save that they believed in God, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy. (85:4-8)

The human condition of those days is similarly depicted in a Makkan tradition narrated by Khabbab ibn al Arat: We complained to the Prophet at a time when he was resting in the shade of the Kabah wall. We said to him: "Don't you pray for us to God?" The Prophet replied: "Those who went before you faced such unbearable trials (due to their faith in a religion other than that of the state). One of them would be brought for trial, a pit would be dug for him, then he would be buried in it in a standing posture, with his head above the edge of the pit. Then a saw would be passed through his head until it split into two parts. Yet even such severe trials did not cause him to waver from his faith. People were scraped with iron combs until all their skin came off and the bones of their bodies were exposed. Yet these acts of persecution did not deter them from adhering to their faith. Certainly God's will shall prevail (that is, the age of religious freedom will certainly come) when a traveler will journey from Sana'a to Hadhramawt, (that is, from one region to another,) without fearing anyone save God. And he will fear no wolf for his sheep. Yet you are in a hurry." (*Sahih Bukhari, Kitab al-Manaqib*, Chapter, *Alamaat an Nubuawah fi'l Islam*).

This *hadith* shows that one of the revolutionary changes to be ushered in in the wake of the Prophet's mission was the end of this ancient age of religious persecution and the replacing of it with an age of religious freedom in order to smooth the path for God's servants to follow His religion. This most significant transformation was to take place as part of a divine plan. That is why the Qur'an enjoined the Prophet's companions to pray in advance to God: "Lord, do not lay on us the burden you laid on those before us. Lord, do not charge us with more than we can bear." (2:286)

This prayer was revealed by God Himself for the benefit of the believers. It was like a divine ordinance announced in the form of a prayer to be recited by the companions. This means that God, who is the controller of history, had decreed a change in this coercive political system of ancient times in order that the religion of Monotheism could be practised and the invitation to people to answer its call could be issued in an atmosphere of freedom – a task which till that point had been seriously hindered by the prevalent religious oppression.

This divine edict became a reality, ostensibly as a result of human intervention, but actually with the succour of the Almighty. In consonance with this divine plan, the Qur'an enjoined the believer to "make war on them until persecution (*fitna*) shall cease and Religion is only for God. If they desist, God is cognizant of all their actions; but if they pay no heed, know then that God will protect you. He is the Noblest Helper and Protector." (8:39-40).



Religious coercion through persecution was totally against the creation plan of God. God created this world for the purpose of putting mankind to the test. For this purpose to be fulfilled, everyone in this world had to enjoy full freedom of speech and action. If people were divested of their freedom, the very purpose of the test would be defeated. Therefore, God granted special help to the believers, so that they might put an end to a system which had suppressed the freedom essential to the divine test in this world.

In order that religion might be wholly for God, the original natural state had to be re-established, that is, a state which was in accordance with the creation plan of God. Here religion (*din*) does not refer to Shariah, but to what in chapter 30, verse 30 of the Qur'an is called 'upright nature.' That is to say, what the believers were commanded to establish was religion in the sense of divine nature and not religion in the sense of Shariah. In other words, it would be proper to say that it was like a kind of divine operation carried out by the Prophet's companions. This was initiated in Arabia where, within a period of 23 years, the religious oppression which had prevailed there under the Quraysh, was brought to an end forever.

In those days, there were two great powers in the neighbourhood of Arabia – the Sassanid and the Byzantine empires. These were two of the greatest bastions of the politically coercive system of ancient times. Their perpetuation meant the consolidation of this manner of governance and it was only their extinction which could put an end to it. However the believers launched these campaigns against the empires in defence. The aggression had been initiated by these empires themselves. This oppression soon bore fruit during the rule of the second caliph, Umar Faruq. During his caliphate, the light of these two despotic empires was forever extinguished.

The French historian, Henri Pirenne, has rightly observed that, if the Arab Muslims of the seventh century had not liquidated the Sassanid and Byzantine empires, mankind might never have been freed from tyranny, and the world might never perhaps have witnessed the age of human freedom with its sweeping intellectual revolution.

Abdullah ibn Umar, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, and son of the second caliph, observed on one occasion: "we fought according to the Qur'anic injunction to end *fitna*, religious persecution, until *fitna* was abolished from the face of the earth forever." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*).

This means that *fitna*, or the ancient political coercive system, had been dealt a severe blow during the period of the pious caliphate itself but, like many other major historical revolutions, this new phase only very gradually reached its culmination.

In the wake of the revolution in the first phase of Islam, religious freedom took a decisive course in history, spurred on in the initial stages by Muslim action, and in the later stages by the active participation of non-Muslim nations. In the first half of the twentieth century, firstly through the League of Nations and later through the United Nations, all the nations of the world unanimously declared that religious freedom was a fundamental right for all, and could not under any circumstances be abrogated.



## The Age of Religious Freedom

The first stage of the cessation of *fitna*, which brought with it the dawn of religious freedom, was accomplished in Arabia. This development took place during the lifetime of the Prophet. During his last days, on the occasion of his final Hajj, the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, preached a sermon, generally known as the Sermon of the Last Pilgrimage, in the presence of all of his companions. One of the points in his address on which the Prophet laid emphasis was that God had sent him "as a mercy to all mankind," and that this being so, they should communicate this message of peace to all people everywhere. In obedience to this injunction given by the Prophet towards the end of his life, his companions traveled far and wide beyond the boundaries of Arabia. Indeed, they spent the rest of their lives carrying out their Prophet's command. Thereafter, their successors, as well as the disciples of these successors, continued to make it their mission to disseminate the teachings of Islam, to the point where finally, the message of Islam had reached the greater part of the known, inhabited world of that age. This *da'wah* process, from beginning to end, was carried out in an entirely peaceful manner. The mere introduction of the ideology of Islam was sufficient to conquer the hearts of the people. British historian, Sir Arthur Keith writes of the Egyptians:

The Egyptians were conquered not by the Sword but by the Qur'an.

This is true not only of the Egyptians, but also of all other nations which entered the fold of Islam. A detailed account of this peaceful spread of God's religion is given in *The Preaching of Islam*, by British historian, T.W. Arnold. This work, running to 508 pages, was first published in 1896. In this matter, the policy of Islam is to keep political activity separate and at a distance from the task of propagation, in order that the communication of the divine message may continue unhampered. Wherever there is political power, the element of coercion cannot be far away: political confrontations must, therefore, be avoided at all costs if the process of *da'wah* is to be set in motion and continue in an atmosphere of freedom.

The Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, foresaw that religious coercion would not be used as a weapon by secular rulers. His insight told him that in future in the secular sphere the principle of religious freedom would become so established and thoroughly consolidated that no secular ruler would ever attempt to put a curb on religious freedom. And that if this problem ever arose it would be due to the adoption of some wrong policy, or the committing of some blunder by the believers themselves. That is why the Prophet gave extremely important guidelines as an advance warning to Muslims.

In books of *hadith*, there are a large number of traditions which foretell the setting in of corruption in the Muslim rulers of later times, yet Muslims were strictly forbidden to wage war on them in the name of political reform. The Muslims were rather enjoined to keep their distance from them, to take to the hills (that is, to stay away from political activities) and to devote themselves to tending their sheep and goats. That is to say that they had to abandon the path of political confrontation in favour of continuing their



activities in non-political fields, such as education, *da'wah*, the service of the Qur'an and *hadith*, etc.

In the first phase of Islam, it was Abdullah ibn Zubayr who violated this prohibition. He engaged in an armed confrontation with the Umayyad ruler, Yazid ibn Muawaiya, in the name of reform in politics. It resulted in the loss of precious Muslim lives and resources. At that time, Abdullah ibn Umar, son of the second caliph and companion of the Prophet, was in Makkah, yet he did not take part in the fighting. Some companions of Abdullah ibn Zubayr met him and asked him to join in the battle. The conversation that took place on this occasion has been recorded in *Sahih al-Bukhari* under three references.

One account has been thus recorded: Nafe narrates that during the (*fitna*) revolt by Ibn Zubayr, two persons came and said to Ibn Umar that people were being killed, while he the son of Umar (the second caliph) as well as a senior companion of the Prophet, refused to take part in the campaign. They asked him what prevented him from doing so. He replied: "I refrain from joining in this battle because of God's express command never to shed the blood of one's brother: it is unlawful." Both replied: "Has not God enjoined us to fight till persecution (*fitna*) ceases?" Abdullah ibn Umar then retorted: "We fought till *fitna* ceased. Religion became only for God, and now you want to fight so that *fitna* may return, and religion will no longer be for God." (*Fathul Bari, Kitab at-Tafsir*, vol. 8, p.32, *Kitab al-Fitan* Vol. 13, p. 49).

From this account we learn that war against persecution as commanded by God was limited in its scope and of a particular nature. It had to be directed against those leaders who had established a system of religious persecution; who were not ready to grant to believers in monotheism the liberty to practise their faith. The companions of the Prophet waged war against such oppression, first of all in Arabia, and then in major parts of Asia and Africa, and succeeded in bringing it to an end. Henceforth, believers in Islam had full freedom to practise their religion and to invite others to answer its call.

After the successful conclusion of this movement against religious coercion, the believers began living in an atmosphere of religious freedom. But during the reign of the Umayyads, when the rot of corruption had begun to set in, certain Muslims, referring to this verse of the Qur'an, engaged themselves in armed conflict with the rulers. To all intents and purposes, the battle was for a good cause: they wanted to oust these corrupt caliphs and replace them with men who were virtuous and just. But, in reality, their actions proved counter-productive.

The Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, foresaw that the effort at political reform would, in effect, culminate in nothing but destruction. It would only replace a lesser evil with a greater evil. That is why he had issued a stern, prior' warning, expressly commanding his people to confine their activities to non-political fields and to opt for a policy of avoidance as regards corruption in political institutions.

In books of *hadith* a number of traditions have been recorded on this subject under the heading of *fitna*. It was thanks to these traditions that, after the development of the Islamic sciences (in terms of which commentaries on the traditions were written), religious scholars arrived at a consensus that it was totally unlawful to revolt against an established Muslim government, regardless of how justified such action might appear to be.



The famous traditionist, Imam al-Nawawi, has commented on the tradition regarding *fitna* as recorded in *Sahih Muslim*:

These traditions clearly convey that we should not enter into any confrontation with political rulers. Even if we find in them any major deviation from Islam, our responsibility will be limited purely to the giving of advice in private. According to the consensus of Muslim scholars, so far as revolt and armed confrontation are concerned, even if the rulers in question are corrupt and tyrannical these actions are unlawful (*haraam*). (*Sahih Muslim*, with the commentary of an-Nawawi, *Kitab al-Imarah*, vol. 12, p.229).

From this commentary, we learn that the waging of war against *fitna* in no way meant the replacing of non-Muslim governments with Muslim regimes. Its actual purpose was to put an end to the use of intellectual and ideological coercion, so that God's servants might be at liberty to perform their devotions to God and communicate God's message in an atmosphere of freedom. Waging war against Muslim rulers will certainly result in a revival of the coercive system, for the rulers will not hesitate to resort to oppression in order to keep their political power intact. The upshot will be that the old *fitna* will re-emerge in a new garb. That is why the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him, strictly forbade such action and Islamic scholars arrived at a consensus that according to the Islamic shariah, insurrection against an established Muslim government was unlawful. Even in unavoidable situations, Muslims are required to strive peacefully and to refrain entirely from launching violent movements aimed at unseating those in positions of authority.

This is undoubtedly an important Islamic injunction. It has great wisdom behind it. To put it briefly, the kings of ancient times made every effort to politicize religion. And when they found the adherents of any given religion placing obstacles in their path, they went all out to crush them. In a similar way, even today, certain factions attempt to Islamize governments, then those rulers who become their targets, wreak all kinds of havoc on Islamists in order to save their political power.

The solution to this problem, as laid down in Islam, is to refrain from setting oneself on a collision course with the rulers. If any evil is found in them, the course to adopt is to give advice, privately, at the individual level, and to avoid all public condemnation or armed clashes. This sage counsel was given by Islam, so that the basic task of propagating and consolidating the religion might continue unhampered in non-political fields.

The manner of working of the traditionists gives us a good historical example. The gigantic task of the compilation of the traditions in the first phase of Islam lasted from the time of the Umayyad Empire till that of the Abbasid Empire. Without doubt, the rot had set in in the Muslim rulers. But the Islamic scholars of this period did not launch any movement against them. Remaining aloof from politics, they continued to serve the cause of the *hadith*. It is the result of this wise policy on their part that today we possess in compiled form the precious treasure of the Prophet's traditions. If the traditions of those days had opted to set themselves up against these Muslim rulers, they would have met the same fate as that of Abdullah ibn Zubayr, Husain ibn Ali, Nafs Zakiyya, etc. any political *jihad* engaged in by these traditionists would have come to the same disastrous end. All the people concerned would have been assassinated by the



rulers, — as had happened with other political opponents. And then the inestimable wealth of the traditions would have been buried along with the traditionists, in whose memories they had been preserved.

From a study of the Qur'an and *hadith*, we find that the actual target of a religious mission is the Islamization of the individual rather than the State. The domination of Islam at the level of the state is only an offshoot of the religious mission and not its actual target.

The Qur'an has clearly stated that, for believers, political power is a gift from God, and not a goal to be striven for. That is why the Qur'an observes:

God has promised those of you who believe and do good works to make them masters in the land as He had made their ancestors before them, to strengthen the faith he chose for them and to change their fears to safety. Let them worship Me and serve no other gods besides Me. Wicked indeed are they who after this deny Me (24:55).

The same point has been made in a tradition of the Prophet: Just as you will be, so will be your rulers. (*Mishkat al-Masabih*).

In actual fact this tradition tells us of a law of nature. The political power of a country depends upon its people. Any system which has the acceptance of the public will perpetuate itself, while a system which is anathema to the people will prove unsustainable. In a truly Islamic society, an un-Islamic political regime cannot take root, and cannot therefore be self-perpetuating. That is why Islam has enjoined the targeting of individuals for Islamic reform. If in any society a large number of people follow Islam, both in the letter and in the spirit, such a society will on its own come under the direction of political power based on Islam.

This separation of *da'wah* activism and political confrontation was crucial. It was by virtue of this separation that the propagation of Islam continued unhampered for a period of a thousand years after the emergence of Islam, until the number of Muslims rose to one billion. Without this, the great achievement of the dissemination of Islam could never have become a reality.

The wisdom of this teaching of Islam has become clearer than ever today. In present times two revolutions have taken place contemporaneously. After a long historical process, religious freedom has been held to be an irrevocable right of human beings all over the world. Today, the right to believe and practice and propagate any religion of one's choice has become an established right of human beings. This freedom has only one condition: that in the availing of these rights, one should not engage in violence of any sort. The adoption of violence will render the practice and propagation of one's religion impossible, whatever the part of the world that might be.

Another great revolution of our times has come in the form of modern communications, which has rendered the spread of Islam much more effective than hitherto. The print and electronic media, as well as other means of communication, have opened all the doors to the global dissemination of the message of Islam. Now the task of *da'wah* in the present age has been so greatly facilitated that it seems as rapid and easy as the diffusion of the sun's rays across the earth. (*Continued on next issue*)

The secret of all success is patience.

The cause of all failure is impatience.



## Giving as God Wills

Man's life and property are gifts of God. He owes everything he possesses to God alone. The only way to give thanks for these innumerable gifts is to dispose of them as God wishes. Such expenditure of one's wealth is symbolic of one's complete trust in God.

Man owes whatever he earns in this world to the fact that God has given him hands and feet to use for this purpose. He has endowed man with eyes and a tongue with which to see and speak. He has blessed him with an intellect which enables him to think and plan. At the same time God has made the world subordinate to man. If the world and that which it contains had not been placed at man's disposal, his physical and mental capabilities alone would never have enabled him to derive any benefit from the world around him. If the wheat grain had not grown in the form of a crop but had stayed lying on the ground like a pebble, it would have become impossible for man to harvest grain from the land. If the powers of nature had not performed their specific functions, electricity could not have been produced, and vehicles would not have been able to move. Whatever man earns in this world is a direct favour from God. In return, man should spend his earnings in a way which would meet with God's approval. He should use his money to help the poor and spend the wealth, which God has granted him, in the ways the God has specified.

Real charity is that which is given for God's sake alone, not for fame, self-esteem or worldly reward. Wealth saves one from worldly hardship; that which is given away for God's sake saves one from the hardships of the life after death.



## Islam and Peace

Islam is a religion of peace. The very word 'Islam' (from the Arabic *silm*) connotes peace. All its teachings are calculated to imbue its adherents with the ideal of living in peace with themselves, with the rest of society, with other countries and even with their sworn enemies. The Quran, treating peace as sacrosanct, frequently exhorts believers to tread the path of reconciliation rather than wage war, urging them to return good for evil, so that direst enemies will turn into dearest friends. The Hadith or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad abounds in instances of the signal success of peaceful solutions to problems. The Prophet's life is marked by events which testify to the effectiveness of peace in situations where, had it not been for the cautionary admonitions of Islam; war might well have been waged with an entirely destructive outcome.

In the early seventh century, at the outset of the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, Arabia was wracked with internecine warfare between tribes, blood feuds were commonplace, and wayfarers could not travel singly in the desert for fear of being slain. It was the Prophet's task in this hostile atmosphere to convey the word of God to people who, steeped in the ignorance of polytheism, were unaware of true religion. Given the harsh lawlessness of the times, it was no mean feat for him to have successfully carried out his mission with an absolute minimum of bloodshed.

What is lamentable nowadays is that Islam is not seen as the peaceful religion which in essence it has always been. This is because extremist Muslims present a distorted image of their religion in order to legitimize their political ambitions and whitewash – as 'holy wars' – their military clashes with those who do not see eye to eye with them. *Jihad* has been construed by them to mean the launching of offensives under the pretext of defending the faith. But the original meaning of *Jihad* in Arabic is 'striving very hard'. Since the early Muslims had to strive hard during wars with aggressors, these wars came, in an extended sense, to be called *jihad*. However, the actual word for such a war in Arabic is *qital*, not *jihad*. *Jihad* in the Quran means an ideological struggle to conquer peoples' hearts and minds.

In Islam, peace has always been considered a *sine qua non* for any fruitful communication of the word of God, for sound intellectual development, and for a stable social equilibrium. Peace, in effect, is the only possible vehicle for progress. The Prophet realized this at a very early stage in his divine mission. He took no step which would have so provoked his opponents as to place his mission in serious jeopardy. It was anathema to him and the early Muslims – as monotheists – that polytheism should still be symbolically represented by 360 idols within the periphery of the Kabah. But he waited 13 years until he judged that the time was ripe to remove them, rather than create a situation in which pitched battles were likely to ensue. Similarly, when his opponents denied him and his companions access to the Kabah, while they were still nine miles away from Makkah at Hudaibiyyah, he had the foresight to refrain from



fighting and, by making major concessions to his enemies, was able to conclude a peace treaty, which ensured many years of peace thereafter in which he and his companions could conduct their religious campaigns undisturbed.

War is always considered as a last resort. It can be waged only by the ruling authorities, and if instigated by individuals or non-governmental groups, it is illegal. It must always be defensive in nature, can commence only after an appropriate declaration of intent, and must be overtly conducted. Guerrilla or proxy wars are impermissible. Moreover, war in Islam cannot be waged against personal enemies, or against non-combatants, but only against aggressors who have already attacked. But it is best avoided altogether, as happened in the case of the Battle of the Trench.

On this occasion large numbers of tribesmen were fast approaching Medina with the avowed intention of attacking it. But the Prophet used strategy to avoid a military encounter. This took the shape of a long deep trench which he and his companions dug, working hard round the clock, so that it would act as a buffer between the Muslims and their foes. The enemy armies, totally frustrated by this insurmountable obstacle, camped there for several days and then finally went away without attacking. Had this stratagem not been resorted to, there would have been serious casualties on both sides and the Islamic mission might well have come to an end.

Quite forgetting the superior tactics of their Prophet, the so-called Muslim Mujahideen have been exhorting their co-religionists all over the world to do battle in the name of Islam. But the Quran quite unequivocally says: "God calls to the home of peace." (10:25) And one of the attributes of God Himself as described in the Quran is 'As-Salaam' which means 'peace and security'. It is up to right thinking people everywhere to reject the militant version of Islam and to start seeing and accepting Islam for what it actually is, that is, a religion which not only advocates peace, but which provides guidance for both the individual and the state as to how peace may be achieved and maintained. Indeed, in the Quran, following divine guidance is likened to treading the paths of peace. (5:16) That is the way to peace and stability.



## Forms of Worship

Worship is a reality, not just an outward form. What is true worship? It is an attachment to one object above all else. It pre-supposes such overwhelming pre-occupation with that one object that everything else is reduced to insignificance. Claims to spiritual allegiance are of no value if one's chosen object of worship is other than spiritual.

When one considers a person worthy of being bowed down to, one is actually worshipping that person. When one attaches so much importance to some worldly gain that one tends to overlook all other considerations in order to achieve it, one is actually worshipping that gain. When one associates all one's hopes and ambitions with wealth, one is worshipping wealth.

In like manner, one is worshipping custom when one places it above all other demands. One is worshipping one's own self when, overwhelmed by selfishness and antipathy, one blindly seeks revenge. One is worshipping the standard of living when one is so obsessed with the idea of improving it that one devotes one's entire time and earnings to that end. One is worshipping fame if one is so greedy for rank and prestige that one will do anything to raise one's status in life. One should never forget that man is being tried in this world to determine whether he is willing to devote himself entirely to God to the exclusion of all else, and to give proof of whether he dedicates himself to God, revering Him, depending upon him and serving Him as he should.



## Labour of a Lifetime

Helen Hooven Santmyer is now 88 years old, crippled, and half-blind. She also suffers from emphysema. Because of her infirmity, she resides permanently in a nursing-home in Xenia, Ohio, U.S.A.

Over fifty years ago, when Helen Hooven Santmyer was working as a reference librarian, she started to write a book. At first she worked on it in her spare time. Then, when ill-health forced her to retire, she continued her work in the nursing-home where she now lives.

She wrote the whole book out herself, in longhand, on a ledger. In 1982, her work complete, she presented it to the Ohio State University Press for publication. The final manuscript filled 11 boxes. A handful of copies were printed, but the book met with no initial success. It seemed as if Helen Hooven Santmyer's name would vanish without trace from the American literary scene.

But at least one person who bought the book read it and liked it. He was praising it in an Ohio library one day when the librarian overheard his conversation. The word was passed on to a producer, then an agent, then the American Book-Club. Each party found the book entrancing and worthy of a greater audience.

Finally Helen Hooven Santmyer's book, entitled " ... *And Ladies of the Club*," was nominated for the Book Club Award in January 1984. It won the Award, and with it a sum of over one million dollars.

Helen Hooven Santmyer did not seek fame or wealth from her novel. Its topic – the story of two Ohio families in the period between the American Civil War and the great depression of the early 1930's is obviously not aimed at the commercial market. The author believed that Sinclair Lewis had painted a false portrait of the American dream in his novel of the 1920's, "Main Street". She wanted to correct that picture. As Haynes Johnson writes in the *Washington Post*:

The author was clearly not in the market for big bucks. She obviously was motivated by saying something in which she believed. The bare account of how she produced the work over the years, in her spare time, in sickness and in health, in itself provides an astonishing testament of her perseverance. (*Guardian Weekly*, January 29, 1984)

Strong belief in something makes one rise above one's worldly situation. It makes one concentrate on one's end in life. No matter what hindrances and obstacles lie in one's path, one soldiers on until one reaches one's final destination.

The conviction that spurs a true believer on is faith in the life to come. He bears all forms of hardships, suffering and adversity in this world. He realizes that this ephemeral world is for the trial of man; in the next eternal world of God he will be rewarded for his efforts. As Helen Hooven Santmyer laboured for



over half a century in the compilation of her book bearing all forms of adversity in her determination to attain her goal in life, so the believer labours all his life for the attainment of reward in the Hereafter. And, as Helen Hooven Santmyer's sustained effort bore her due reward in this world, so the believer's sustained effort will bear him due reward in the next world: he will be made to enter a paradise of eternal repose and bliss.



## Recognizing Oneself

God has a special purpose for every individual human being. To be born into this world is to make a promise to God that one will spend one's life fulfilling the purpose that God intends for one. The worth of every human being lies in his faithfulness to this promise.

God has endowed every individual with certain talents. These talents may be inborn, or they may develop at a later stage in life. It is for every human being to recognize where his talents lie, and then make use of them, thereby enacting the role that God has singled out for him. One who recognizes himself in this way has taken up his true place in God's pattern of creation, while one who fails to do so will find himself at odds – not only with himself – but with the whole of creation.

This can be illustrated by the respective cases of two companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Abu Huraira was one of the companions, and Khalid, the son of Walid, another. No less than 5,374 traditions (sayings of the Prophet) have been related on the authority of Abu Huraira, while less than one hundred can be traced back to Khalid. Extraordinary as this disparity may seem, all it indicates is a difference in the arena in which they worked. It does not mean that one of them did more for Islam than the other.

Abu Huraira and Khalid were both sincere, dedicated Muslims. But as regards talents, they were very different from each other. Each of them awoke to his separate vocation in life, and followed it implicitly. In accordance with his own particular abilities, Abu Huraira picked one arena in which to serve the cause of Islam, while Khalid picked another, equally suitable one, for himself.

Before Khalid became a Muslim, he took part in several military campaigns against Islam. He later told of how he used to fight with the feeling that he had "adopted a mistaken stance" – that he was fighting for the wrong cause. His conscience continued to haunt him, until shortly before the conquest of Makkah, when he went to Medina and accepted Islam.

Khalid was by nature exceptionally brave and courageous. He recognized this quality of his, and saw how to use it to full effect. By becoming fully aware of himself, he recognized the special part that had been delegated to him on the vast stage of the Islamic arena. He determined to use the courage God had given him to destroy polytheistic religion, and establish monotheism in its place.

Khalid, therefore, dedicated the rest of his life to active service in the cause of Islam. Continually he would ask God to make him strong and steadfast in this path, and he also used to ask God's Prophet to pray for him.

As for Abu Huraira, he did not have the same qualities as Khalid. What he did have, however, was a prodigious memory. Recognizing where his talents lay, he resolved to use them in the service of Islam.



It is related in the Hadith that Abu Huraira once asked the Prophet to pray that God should give him knowledge which he would not forget. The Prophet said "Amen" to that, and prayed as Abu Huraira had requested. Abu Huraira's exceptional memory was both a result of the Prophet's prayer for him, and also of his own eagerness to serve Islam in the way most suited to his talents and temperament.

Under the protective wing of such prayers, he devoted himself heart and soul to the area to which he was assigned. Spending as much time as he could in the company of the Prophet, he listened attentively to what was said, memorizing it and – when the need arose – writing it down. By recognizing where his own talents lay, and in doing all he could to develop them, he has taken his place in Islamic history as the greatest original relator of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

Every person has a responsibility to first recognize himself – to see where his own talents lie and do all he can to channel them in a positive direction. By doing this one is benefiting, not only oneself, but even more the cause to which one is committed.



## All power belongs to God

The Prophet sent Dhamam ibn Thaalaba to preach the message of monotheism to the Banu Saad ibn Bakr tribe. He came before them and urged them to forsake idolatry. "What terrible gods – Lat and Uzza – you have chosen," he said. "Don't say such things," they warned him. "Aren't you afraid of being stricken by leucoderma, leprosy or madness?" Lat and 'Uzza were the idols that these people worshipped. They feared that, by condemning them, Dhamam was exposing himself to insanity, or illnesses such as leucoderma or leprosy. "Woe betide you," Dhamam replied. "Lat and 'Uzza can do one neither harm nor good."